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ABSTRACT

Six essential teaching competencies and observable characteristics are outlined to help administrators evaluate special education teachers. Administrators are urged to use evaluation as an inservice tool rather than a weapon. The competencies include the following: (1) accurate and effective communication in the content area and professional rapport with students (for example, subject matter content spelled out in a total service plan for each student); (2) feedback and communication to enhance student learning and understanding (e.g., avoidance of sarcasm); (3) appropriate utilization of teaching methods and resources for each area taught (for example, provision of many alternatives in materials); (4) encouragement of student involvement, responsibility, and critical thinking (e.g., use of reality therapy to deal with behavior problems); (5) classroom management to promote the best use of instructional time (including organization to keep a system of accountability of materials); and (6) creation of an atmosphere conducive to learning, self-discipline, and development of realistic and positive self-concepts (including appropriate expression of a sense of humor). The objectives of special education should be fit into a total plan of instruction for the school. If principals accepted this philosophy, there would be no basic difference in evaluating the performance of regular and special education teachers. (CL)

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GUIDELINES FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO USE IN EVALUATING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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GUIDELINES FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO USE IN EVALUATING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

Introduction

A common concern expressed by building principals is "How do I evaluate special education teachers when I don't know anything about special education?" This represents a weakness in certification of administrators, because there isn't a requirement of credits in special education to receive an administrator's license. However, generally, there is no course specifically taught at the graduate level in training administrators in the skill of teacher evaluation. In New Mexico the State Department of Education has a time line for improving teacher preparation and teacher evaluation. It has developed six essential teaching competencies that can and should be applied to special education teachers. Each of these competencies will be reviewed in this paper, and examples of behaviors that exemplify each competency will be discussed.

The evaluation of a special education teacher should have the same basis as the evaluation of a teacher in a regular classroom. The characteristics of children with special problems must be understood by the evaluator to make the evaluation relevant and to serve the purpose of improving their learning environment. Special education teachers need to feel that they aren't viewed differently by the evaluator and must have confidence in the evaluator's perceptions of their job descriptions. This implies constant dialogue between the administrator writing the evaluation and the teacher. This extends from the principal's attending EARs in an effort to understand the children and the instructional program to making constant classroom visitations. This creates an understanding base that allows for meaningful dialogue at the time the evaluation is signed by both parties.

PL 94-142 and PL 98-199 have implications for teacher evaluation inasmuch as EARs and IEPs guarantee an appropriate education. Teachers must carry out these mandates, or they are in nonconformity with the law. Professional competency then becomes imperative, and the teacher takes on a responsibility by signing off on an IEP that calls for accountability.

The state evaluation plan emphasizes that teachers "should not be terminated for poor performance, but for failure to improve within a specified time; they must be provided direction and assistance toward the desired improvement." This philosophy must be used among the 2,400 special education teachers in New Mexico. It must be remembered that we face categorical teacher certifications that create problems for teachers in meeting standards of the state. Administrators must assist staff development and use evaluation as an inservice tool and not as a weapon.

ESSENTIAL TEACHING COMPETENCIES AND OBSERVABLE CHARACTERISTICS

1. **The Teacher Communicates Accurately and Effectively in the Content Area and Maintains a Professional Rapport with Students:**

   A. When the IEP was written, a set of learning style characteristics was established based on the evaluation, such as does the child only respond to visual clues when being introduced to something new? If so, does the teacher make use of visual aides as an introduction to all subjects? Evaluation point: Make use of interpretations from the IEP in structuring learning modalities.

   B. Regardless of the handicapping condition, lines of communication are established between teacher and child. Many special education students are disenfranchised learners, because they only occupied seats in classes that totally missed them in developing two-way communication, and they became unsuccessful at being only a respondent. Evaluation point: Students should have no fear about asking for assistance or responding with wrong answers and getting positive corrections.

   C. All special education classrooms have a subject matter content spelled out in a total service plan for each student. Evaluation point: The content of the material must parallel that which is being taught in regular classrooms, because our mainstreaming efforts should not confuse the student with two sets of information.

   D. Large-group instruction in a special education class is necessary occasionally whenever it is appropriate in order to prepare students for mainstreaming. Since the numbers in special education classes are smaller than regular classes, the teacher has an opportunity to assist students in learning group participatory skills. Evaluation point: The rate of instruction is paced for the slowest student but is made interesting enough even for the quickest learner.

   E. Direct and sometimes repetitive direction-giving is needed for learning and behavior disabled students, because initial misinterpretations of a skill can only create failures. Evaluation point: Students must be able to state directions to the teacher before tasks are commenced.

2. **The Teacher Obtains Feedback from and Communicates with Students in a Manner which Enhances Student Learning and Understanding:**

   A. Placing the learner into the arena of understanding why certain things must be learned is a difficult task. Abstract concepts about one's environment cannot be learned by all while in school if things are only confined to dittoes, workbooks, and texts. Evaluation point: The subject at hand is related in some way to the lives of the students or their families through discussion.

B. Basic skill teaching has a redundancy that must be accepted by teachers and students. Evaluation point: The teacher must not apologetically use repetition of skills but explain that no one learns without it.

C. Many special education children have been verbally abused because of their handicaps without realizing that it was the handicap that was being addressed and not their inner person. Sometimes it takes years to break this feeling. Evaluation point: No sarcasm can be used with any child, or immediate relatedness to the handicap is made by the child.

D. Handicapped children usually render immediate responses to their environment. They in turn demand immediate responses about their behavior. Evaluation point: Honest, immediate reactions to positive behavior provide security needed by the child.

E. One of the purposes of any classroom is developing humanization by having interactions with others. Since the majority of students will need to develop their interpersonal relationships, opportunities must be given for student-to-student discussion and cooperative projects. Evaluation point: Students must be given the chance of leading discussions and speaking to other students in discussions and not only making responses to the teacher.

F. Special education classes should allow for a quick response from the teacher to the student in regard to evaluation of class work. Evaluation point: Class exercises should be graded with the student as soon as completed or within a reasonable time.

3. The Teacher Appropriately Utilizes a Variety of Teaching Methods and Resources for Each Area Taught:

A. The resourcefulness of the teacher in securing varieties of material requires constant searching by looking at samples supplied by administrators and visiting curriculum laboratories at colleges and universities. The plethora of individualized instructional materials produced make selection for special education classes easier. Evaluation point: The classroom must present many alternatives for learning a skill or subject by giving the students a wide range of materials.

B. Many special education students reach failure quickly if not given a highly structured sequencing of all their learning activities. Time is not of the essence, but appropriate practicing of skills is. Evaluation point: Adequate recognition must be made when a student can learn without going through every step of a skill as proscribed in a text; however, when failing, there must be a return to square one.

C. Many special education students have passed through a great number of specialists to the point of losing any sense of being capable of doing something independently. A renewal of trusting oneself of being capable of doing something worthwhile should be an objective

for special education. Evaluation point: The teacher offers positive encouragement to the student by allowing independent work that can be presented to the class in the form of art work, a poem, or whatever the student chooses.

D. The regular classroom may be presenting the student with a teaching style completely opposite to the special education room, which results in two sets of behaviors from the child. This may be good for adapting to all types of people but may confuse the learning style of the child. Evaluation point: The special education teacher has the greatest responsibility in communicating with the regular teacher in regard to methods used with a child.

4. The Teacher Encourages the Development of Student Involvement, Responsibility, and Critical Thinking:

A. Many special education students have suffered from being labeled as "slow," "Can't concentrate," "won't work," or "lazy." This has pre-empted their right of being allowed to try things because of being over-directed by teachers. A withdrawal from volunteering information or feeling that there is no need to try has been a reaction formation to this labeling and over-direction. Evaluation point: Whenever possible, the students are allowed to actively participate in their learning as opposed to continuing a passive role by relying on dittoes and workbooks.

B. Students who have displayed inappropriate behavior have been placed in special education for some type of turnaround in behavior. If the teacher allows open discussions and active involvement, there are bound to be emergent behavior problems. Reality therapy may assist in ameliorating these problems. If the student can generate some feelings of ownership of his education through active participation and be positively rewarded, inappropriate behavior may decrease. Evaluation point: The teacher must display the highest level of tenacity in allowing active participation again after misbehavior. In special education there are no first and second chances, but there must be continual chances.

C. A disenfranchised learner is made to feel worthwhile when an answer or idea he has given is used by the teacher in a lesson or discussion. Evaluation point: The teacher identifies a student's response and immediately creates a learning situation out of it for the entire class.

D. Critical thinking is predicated on many ideas being given to arrive at a solution or solutions. For discussions in social studies and subjects outside the basics skills, we must generate the ability in special education students to project ideas about feelings and other people and to demonstrate that they are people with ideas. This will help their going back to regular classes by releasing themselves from the bondage of "special education." Evaluation point: The teacher must structure and direct critical thinking exercises to commence a process for fearful students.

5. **The Teacher Manages the Classroom to Ensure the Best Use of Instructional Time:**

A. The individualized approaches required in special education demand a unique teacher to manage an accounting of skill and behavior developments. Since radical changes take place in the students in a short period of time, one's memory can't be relied on to create a paper review of the child for EARs, annual reviews, and other purposes. Each teacher must develop a systematic note-taking procedure which may even include making notes in the presence of the students. Evaluation point: A teacher must devise some accountability system in writing to be able to validate the IEP.

B. If a reality therapy approach or similar behavior management plans are used, group punishment can be acceptable if the students participated in creating the plan. The teacher must help establish the parameters of the plan or, today's societal obsession with bizarre outcomes will prevail. An individual sometimes becomes the victim of the group, and this must be tempered by the teacher. Evaluation point: A behavior management plan must be developed, and all students should participate in its development, or responsibility for one's behavior will not emerge.

C. Individualized materials have a tendency to become disorganized through use, and components can get lost. If some system isn't devised for the return or replacement of materials, the intent of individualized instruction is diminished. Evaluation point: The teacher must have students organized to keep a system of accountability of materials.

D. The self-contained classroom special education teacher becomes a counselor of behavior problems. Expectations are set for this "miracle-worker" to bring about changes in short order and with lasting effects. Again, the IEPs generally state behavioral changes, and the teacher must respond with counseling techniques. Evaluation point: Teachers must develop the professional attitude that students aren't misbehaving because of launching personal attacks against them but are only responding to their problems.

6. **The Teacher Creates an Atmosphere Conducive to Learning, Self-Discipline, and Development of Realistic and Positive Self-Concepts:**

A. Upon entering a special education classroom, an evaluator should have a general understanding of the characteristics of the students. Our New Mexico categorical classification tends to stereotype expectations, but evaluators must be careful to think not only of BD, B level or LD, C level, etc. This same attitude can prevail among special education teachers and can hinder how students are to act or learn. This type of assessment can create a classroom environment that doesn't recognize students' interests and needs but only directs expectations towards categorical descriptions and prescriptions. Evaluation point: If the teacher is sensitive to

the needs of students, the students will appear satisfied and even happy regardless of their category.

B. A sense of humor is a prerequisite to teaching any student. Many special education students have suffered so many embarassments, humiliations, and failures that there is no humor in life for them. Helping these students regain humor is a labor of love that will be long-lasting. Evaluation point: The teacher must laugh with the students and represent a model of displaying humor in good taste and not allow it to generate into laughing AT someone.

C. Reconstructing destroyed self-concepts of humans is the largest challenge we face in the public schools. Pre-school damage to ego, severe trauma from home environments, schools becoming surrogate parents, and insensitive teachers and administrators all become part of a complex profile of a special education student. This creates the need for a place where the student can self-identify and be accepted as he is and get a realistic look at his behavior. This means the teacher must listen to his story about his life, be sensitive to it, and help with an interpretation. Evaluation point: The teacher must allow time for the student to describe himself before applying judgments and help him reconstruct his life.

CONCLUSION

The evaluator of special education teachers must school himself on the characteristics of special education students before constructing any system of teacher evaluation. This means understanding the evaluation data and the IEPs. The qualified evaluator should then be able to set expectations of the teachers on the needs of students. If the evaluator is the building principal, he or she should be able to fit the objectives of special education into a total plan of instruction for the school. This concept allows the special education teacher to be evaluated on the basis of meeting special needs students and helping accommodate all students with a free and appropriate education. If this philosophy is accepted by the principals, there should be no basic difference in the evaluation points for the classroom performances of regular and special education teachers.

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